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JOURNAL ARTICLE

# Antiracism: a neoliberal alternative to a left

**Adolph Reed Jr.**

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## Antiracism: a neoliberal alternative to a left

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At a 1991 conference at the Harvard Law School, where he was a tenured full professor, I heard the late, esteemed legal theorist, Derrick Bell, declare on a panel that blacks had made no progress since 1865. I was startled not least because Bell's own life, as well as the fact that Harvard's black law students' organization put on the conference, so emphatically belied his claim. I have since come to understand that those who make such claims experience no sense of contradiction because the contention that nothing has changed is intended actually as an assertion that racism persists as the most consequential force impeding black Americans' aspirations, that no matter how successful or financially secure individual black people become, they remain similarly subject to victimization by racism.

That assertion is not to be taken literally as an empirical claim, even though many advancing it seem earnestly convinced that it is; it is rhetorical. No sane or at all knowledgeable person can believe that black Americans live under the same restricted and perilous conditions now as in 1865. The claim therefore carries a silent preface: "(this incident/phenomenon/pattern makes it seem as though) nothing has changed." It is more a jeremiad than an analysis and is usually advanced in response to some outrage. As I have pointed out elsewhere (Henwood 2013), for the claim to have the desired rhetorical force, those making it must assume that things *have* changed because the charge is fundamentally a denunciation of objectionable conditions or incidents as atavistic and a call for others to regard them as such. Attempting to mobilize outrage about some action or expression through associating it with discredited and vilified views or practices is a common gambit in hortatory political rhetoric, more or less effective for a rally or leaflet. But this antiracist politics is ineffective and even destructive when it takes the place of scholarly interpretation or strategic political analysis.

New Orleans provides a useful illustration of the limitations of contemporary antiracism as a politics. Antiracist political critique failed abysmally after Katrina to mobilize significant opposition to elimination of low-income public housing or to the ongoing destruction of public

schools. That politics, which posits an abstract “black community” against an equally abstract “racism,” could not provide persuasive responses to the blend of underclass ideology that

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Dialectical Anthropology is an international journal that seeks to invigorate discussion among left intellectuals by publishing peer-reviewed articles, editorials, letters, reports from the field, political exchanges, and book reviews that foster open debate through criticism, research and commentary from across the social sciences and humanities. We provide a forum for work with a pronounced dialectical approach to social theory and political practice for scholars and activists working in Marxist and broadly political-economic traditions, and those who wish to be in dialogue or debate with these traditions. Since its founding by Stanley Diamond 1975, Dialectical Anthropology has been dedicated to the transformation of class society through internationalizing conversations about the stakes of contemporary crises and the means for social change. For three decades, the pages of the journal have provided space for comment, criticism, agreement, and disagreement about significant issues of our times. Dialectical Anthropology is committed to reaching beyond an Anglophone readership via submissions, dialogue and active participation in languages other than English, and an editorial policy that promotes collaborations beyond the traditional concerns of Western academics.

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